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## [2020 Honorable Mention] The Stress and Mental and Emotional Health of Undocumented Students

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The Stress and Mental and Emotional Health of Undocumented College

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### Abstract

This paper discusses the stress and mental and emotional health of undocumented students, including DACA students (referred to as DACAmented), DREAMERS, and AB 540 students, during their college application process and their college journey. Also, this paper focuses on how immigration status and stress factors impact undocumented students' academic and personal life, how those factors impact the mental and emotional health of undocumented students, and how undocumented students overcome or address the stress factors they experience. Finally, this paper discusses how educational institutions in higher education need to improve to make an undocu-friendly and supportive environment for undocumented students.

*Keywords:* undocumented, DACA, Dreamers, stress, mental health, college

College is a stressful time for students. They are trying to pass their classes to graduate while finding and creating their own identity amid challenges such as roommate conflicts, transportation, and relationship problems (Azmitia, Syed, & Radmacher, 2013; Hurst, Baranik, & Daniel, 2012). College students try their best to maintain good mental health, but sometimes the stressors that they encounter causes them to have mental health issues such as depression (Azmitia, Syed, & Radmacher, 2013). How do college students become successful and survive college life? Resilience.

Resilience is the process of succeeding in dealing with the negative consequences of risk exposure, dealing effectively and successfully with traumatic experiences, and avoiding any negative paths or approaches associated with those risks (Garmezy et al., 1984; Luthar et al., 2000; Masten & Powell, 2003; Olsson et al., 2003; Rutter 1985; Werner, 1992). Resilience may come in personal and environmental protective factors.

Personal protective factors include own characteristics in resilience, such as having high positive expectations, having a sense of purpose and future, being socially competent, and having problem-solving skills (Bernard, 1995). Also, the more resources available to individuals during hard times, the more these individuals will be able to deal with the obstacles they face more effectively (Luthar & Zelazo, 2003). When it comes to academic resilience, the main personal protective factor for students is believing in their abilities to achieve (Gordon, 1996).

Resiliency is an ecological phenomenon (Greene, 2002; Jozefowicz-Simbeni & Allen-Meares, 2002; Richman & Fraser, 2001), therefore, an individual's environmental protective factors include outside resources that may increase the probability of having positive

outcomes during stressful times. These resources include but are limited to parental support, adult mentoring (from community or school), and/or community organizations. Overall, when it comes to academic resilience, the main environmental protective factors are support and encouragement from the people that surround the individual (Bernard, 1995).

This paper focuses specifically on the stress and mental health of undocumented students and how their immigration status and resilience play a role in their lives. I will include scientific research that covers the barriers and stress factors that undocumented students face due to their immigration status and the impact they have on mental health. In addition to the academic success of undocumented students despite hardships, and how supported and safe they feel on their college campuses. I will also add scientific research that covers what college campuses are doing to support and create a friendly environment for their undocumented students and I will discuss the implications for colleges on how they can improve to be undocu-friendly. It is important to note that undocumented students in this paper, include students with DACA, the CA Dream Act, and AB 540 students.

### *Introducing Important Terms*

Deferred Action for Childhood Arrivals (DACA) is a policy that was passed in 2012. Through this policy, undocumented youth are granted a two-year work permit. During the two-year period, DACA recipients are deferred from getting deported. This policy has allowed undocumented students a greater opportunity to reach their academic and career goals (Anaya et al., 2014). The California DREAM (Development, Relief, and Education for Alien Minors) Act or CA DREAM Act is state aid offered to undocumented students. It's like the FAFSA, except

that the undocumented students do not receive federal aid, instead they get the Cal Grant, Middle-Class Grant, or the Chafee Grant (California Student Aid Commission, 2019). The AB 540 is a California Assembly Bill that was passed in 2001 for noncitizen students living in California to pay in-state tuition instead of out-state tuition (Perez et al., 2010).

*The reason I choose to research this topic*

As an undocumented student, DACA recipient, DREAMER, and AB 540 student, I have struggled in many different ways that my college peers, professors, and institutional agents do not understand. I have also felt left out and excluded on campus when informational workshops are offered because they unintentionally exclude information that might be helpful for undocumented students. For example, I once attended a Cal Fresh workshop that got my hopes up in receiving aid for my food security problems, but when I was applying, I found out that I don't qualify due to my status. Based on this experience, among many others, I have to notice that when it comes to informational events on resources, the campus tends to focus on the idea that everyone can benefit from the resources they are offering even though that is not the case. Whether this is intentional, it damages undocumented students like me by giving us hope only to end up in disappointment. Also, even before I was admitted to campus, I had to do a lot of research on my own about the resources schools offered, because institutional agents lacked or were unaware of the information I needed as an undocumented student.

Throughout my experience at my institution, I have noticed the change and progress towards making undocumented and DACAmented students like myself feel included. For example, when giving financial aid workshops, speakers automatically incorporate both the

FAFSA and the DREAM Act, this helps the undocumented students who are not comfortable opening up about their status from exposing themselves because the information they needed has been covered. However, there is a lot of room for improvement as my institution can incorporate information regarding all students (citizen, documented, undocumented, and DACAmented students) to show undocumented students that their institution cares and is thinking about them. Therefore, the first reason for doing this paper is to bring awareness of the mental health and stressors undocumented students experience while in college, and how they succeed despite the stressors they face. The second reason is to bring awareness of how schools can improve their approach to undocumented students by creating a safe and undocumented-friendly environment, and how they can facilitate their application process from the beginning.

### *Stress Factors Among Undocumented Students*

The main stress factor affecting undocumented students is the fear of deportation (Dozier, 1993; Perez et al., 2010). Their fear prevents them from getting medical attention, prevents them from getting a better job if they lack legal work authorization, and they are hesitant to build close relationships for fear of disclosing their status (Dozier, 1993; O'Neal et al., 2016). The other main stressor derived from their immigration status is the risk of not being able to obtain employment after graduating and getting a degree in the career they want to pursue (Cha, Enriquez, & Ro, 2019; Perez et al., 2006).

Financial challenges are also a stress factor for undocumented students (O'Neal et al., 2016). Unlike their documented counterparts, undocumented students have limited financial resources to pay off housing, food, and book fees (Anaya et al., 2014; Cha, Enriquez, & Ro, 2019; Gámez, Lopez, & Overton, 2017; O'Neal et al., 2016; Perez et al., 2010; Stebleton & Aleixo, 2015). Sometimes the lack of financial aid means not going to college until later when it can be afforded. If they are scholarships available, undocumented students hesitate to apply due to the fear that they will be asked for a social security number (Perez et al., 2010).

Undocumented students take on the burden of one or more jobs to pay for their academic education, making it hard to balance work and academics. Not to mention the stress of legality with the systems in place that requires a social security number for a job (O'Neal et al., 2016; Gámez, Lopez, & Overton, 2017). Others have to deal with the lack of acknowledgment for extra work to their school assignments in addition to balancing life, school, and work, which leaves them physically and emotionally exhausted. (Perez et al., 2010). Unlike the undocumented students who don't have work permits, undocumented students with DACA can work legally, however, being a recipient of DACA also has its stressors. Undocumented students constantly worry about their behavior and actions (that a typical citizen would get away with) as to not make a wrong move that will get them in trouble with the law for fear of having their DACA applications rejected or having their DACA removed if they already have it (O'Neal et al., 2016).

Institutional barriers also add to the stress of undocumented students (Jacobo & Ochoa, 2011; O'Neal et al., 2016). Institutional barriers included educating institutional agents about policies such as DACA or the Dream Act because they lacked the knowledge regarding these



types of policies that affect undocumented students and the inconsistency of policies across and within schools created greater stress for undocumented students (O’Neal, 2016). Also, undocumented students noticed a lack of intention in locating advisors and counselors who have experience working with DACAmented and undocumented students in their institutions, and this meant that they had to find the resources they needed and the individuals who could help them on their own (Gámez, Lopez, & Overton, 2017). Individuals who represented an institution and individuals who worked in the community were the two types of mentors undocumented students encountered on their own “by knocking door to door” when their institutions lacked DACAmented and undocumented informed counselors and advisors (Gámez, Lopez, & Overton, 2017). The mentors that undocumented students found were unaware of the details about DACA and the status of being undocumented, however, they were committed to supporting the undocumented students by informing and educating themselves about the undocumented students’ situation in their own time (Gámez, Lopez, & Overton, 2017). Overall, the majority of the mentoring support that undocumented students received came from individuals in the community, community organizations, and families on how to enroll, navigate and gain access to the limited resources offered to them on college campuses (Gámez, Lopez, & Overton, 2017).

### *The Mental and Emotional Health of Undocumented Students*

The legal status of undocumented students affects the students’ sense of purpose in life (Gonzales et al., 2013). Due to their immigration status and the consequences that it brings to every aspect of their lives, undocumented students tend to feel lonely (Dozier, 1993), depressed (Dozier, 1993; O’Neal et al., 2016; Perez et al., 2010), emotionally isolated (O’Neal et al., 2016), rejected, hopeless, and anxious (Borjian, 2018; Perez et al., 2010). Furthermore, undocumented

students deal with feelings such as uncertainty, despair, shame, marginalization, anger, agitation, (Borjian, 2018; Cortes, 2008; Dozier, 1993; Stebleton & Aleixo, 2015), and some even experienced bullying and discrimination (Borjian, 2018).

Disappointment and constant rejection lead to undocumented students feeling insecure, which in turn increases their chances of suffering from anxiety (Borjian, 2018; Lopez et al., 2010). An example of this is when an undocumented student gets awarded a scholarship only to have it taken away due to their status and lack of documentation needed. Having to go through stuff like this over and over again causes undocumented students to become cautious around institutional agents (e.g., faculty members, student affairs professionals) which makes it harder for them to receive the help they need (Lopez et al., 2010). Also, undocumented students avoid institutional agents due to the shame they feel (Lopez et al., 2010). The majority of undocumented students grew up in the U.S.; what once used to be a sense of pride turned into a sense of humiliation because they lack the legal papers that they need, which is why they decide to avoid institutional agents altogether to protect their legal status.

The media's portrayal of the Latinx immigrant community does not help undocumented Latinx students' sense of shame. The type of discrimination (e.g., "immoral criminals" or social threats') that the media portrays of these undocumented students destroys the chance for them to develop a healthy identity development (Lopez et al., 2010). In addition, being overrepresented as "illegal aliens" (Portes & Rumbaut, 2006; Suarez-Orozco & Suarez-Orozco, 200) creates a greater sense of discrimination and it leads undocumented students to constitute the term "illegal" as part of their identity, which in turn affects how they define and interpret themselves as individuals while creating an internalized stigma (Gonzales et al., 2013). Furthermore,

exposure to hostility, discrimination, stereotypes, and microaggressive behaviors leads to undocumented students to feel that they are only perceived as social outcasts or as inferiors (Perez et al., 2010). Moreover, the lack of sensitivity of institutional agents towards undocumented students is a constant reminder that they are not wanted nor belong in society. This means that aside from dealing with federal and state laws and policy discrimination, undocumented students deal with the ignorance and biases from institutional agents (Perez et al., 2010).

### *Undocumented Students' Use of Mental Health Resources*

All the constant exposure to stressors makes undocumented students see their mental strain as normal, which in turn blinds their perception of receiving help (Cha, Enriquez, & Ro, 2019). Undocumented students 'avoidance or denial towards their mental constraint increased their perspective of their mental strain as being normal. When undocumented students realized that their mental constraint was serious, they dismissed it as being temporary. They would do the "if and then" scenarios such as "If it doesn't go away in two weeks, I'll get help" but if they felt better they wouldn't get help, this was an ongoing cycle for them (Cha, Enriquez, & Ro, 2019). Undocumented students also avoided receiving mental health help because they were afraid of receiving a clinical diagnosis (Cha, Enriquez, & Ro, 2019).

Other undocumented students believed that talking to a counselor would not solve the root of problems that stressed; therefore, talking to a counselor would be useless (Cha, Enriquez, & Ro, 2019). Others worried that if they did talk to a counselor about their immigration-related issues, that they would feel worse, not better, so they would rather avoid their issues altogether (Cha, Enriquez, & Ro, 2019). Others worried about disclosing their status

for fear of deportation (confidential issues), counselors do not understand where are they coming from (counselors do not share their background), counselors lack understanding of immigration-related issues lead them to make inappropriate comments or react inappropriately, and counselors cannot see their needs as undocumented students (Cha, Enriquez, & Ro, 2019).

*Resilience and How Undocumented Students Cope with Stress Factors*

Perez et al., (2009) labeled undocumented students with high risks and low levels of protective factors as *high risk*, undocumented students with low risks and high levels of protective factors as *protected*, and undocumented students with high risks and high levels of protective factors as *resilient*. High risk and resilient students tended to work more hours, experience stronger feelings of societal rejection, and had parents with little education. They faced higher levels of adversity than protected students did. Resilient and protected students performed higher in academics, had more environmental protective factors, and were more involved in extracurricular activities, volunteering, and were more exposed to parental valuing of school than high-risk students did (Perez et al., 2009). Furthermore, resilience in academic success was found to be correlated with environmental and personal resources among undocumented Latinx students and their academic performance was positive when they had more access to resources (Perez et al., 2009).

Gómez, Lopez, and Overton (2017) defined resiliency as a personal strength, perseverance (Borjian, 2018), courage, and bravery that helped undocumented students to remain in school despite having the uncertainty of graduating college or how their future would look like after college. Undocumented students' resiliency was best demonstrated when they accepted the fact they will have to work twice as hard to graduate college while remaining persistent and

determined during difficult times. Overall, undocumented students' success came from their abilities to form their support systems when none were offered or available to them (Gómez, Lopez, and Overton, 2017).

Ways in which undocumented students coped with stress include self-talk such as "get over it" or "move on," and their grit or strength of character (Gómez, Lopez, & Overton, 2017; O'Neal et al., 2016). They also keep their stress hidden by containing their emotions and ignoring or denying stress (O'Neal et al., 2016). Compared to their citizen counterparts, undocumented students with high depression had a lower GPA and undocumented students with low depression had higher grit. This means that GPA and grit are correlated with depression among undocumented students (O'Neal et al., 2016). Undocumented students' grit was enforced by their families and their goals to support their families by making their parents' sacrifices worth it (Borjian, 2018; O'Neal et al., 2016; Perez et al., 2010). Also, their grit was reinforced by their desire to resist and overcome the challenges they faced such as stereotypes (O'Neal et al., 2016). Furthermore, their grit manifested through perseverance, optimism, and pride to cope with stress and depression (O'Neal et al., 2016). Moreover, undocumented students used the challenges they faced as motivators to obtain and meet their plans (e.g., obtaining their career goal to have economic security) because failing was not an option for them (Borjian, 2018; Gómez, Lopez, & Overton, 2017). Lastly, "ganas" is a Spanish word derived from another Spanish word "ganar," which means "to win." Ganas was the main internal motivation that prompted undocumented students to remain persistent in times of struggle during college, without shifting their focus from their goals (Gómez, Lopez, & Overton, 2017).

Undocumented students also turned to their parents, institutional agents, peer support, campus support programs, and civic engagement as coping mechanisms (Perez et al., 2010). Even though parents did not have high education or the knowledge of how to navigate the educational systems in the U.S., their love, support, and guidance encouraged their undocumented students to continue moving forward (Perez et al., 2010). Moreover, not all undocumented students have had negative experiences with institutional agents (Stebbleton & Aleixo, 2015). For example, for some undocumented students, institutional agents served as motivators, moral support, and advocates that helped them remain optimistic (Perez et al., 2010). Furthermore, peer influence and support helped undocumented students feel validated when they interacted with other student groups that were in the same boat or were going through similar experiences as them (Perez et al., 2010). Undocumented students have also felt supported by campus support programs that promote a sense of empowerment, advocacy, intellectual development, and knowledge of financial aid and other resources (Perez et al., 2010). They also have felt reassured and validated by campus support programs (Rendón, 1994).

Furthermore, undocumented students used civic engagement such as providing social services and volunteering (Borjian, 2018) as a way to prove to themselves and society that they are contributing members of society, even though it can be hard because they sometimes won't get recognized as such (Perez et al., 2010). Other undocumented students use work as a coping mechanism since they lack the financial resources to pay their school and personal fees (Perez et al., 2010). Lastly, some undocumented students have expressed their desire to achieve academically to give back to their fellow undocumented students, who will start their college journey, so they don't struggle as they did (Anaya et al., 2014; Borjian, 2018).

*Implications for College Institutions*

According to Perez et al., (2010), to make their campus undocu-friendly and welcoming, colleges need to train all their faculty, staff, counselors, and advisors on the policies that affect undocumented students, including DACAmented students (Gámez, Lopez, & Overton, 2017). By doing so, all institutional agents will be more sensitive to the needs of and their approach to undocumented students (Perez et al., 2010). Also, to gain the trust of undocumented students who are hesitant about opening up about their needs due to their legal status and to encourage them to continue moving forward, campuses can establish multicultural services and programs by hiring institutional agents that are bilingual and ethnically diverse (Perez et al., 2010). All campuses such as Cal State, Monterey Bay can hold Undocu-Ally training for students, faculty, and staff to attend. Lastly, campuses can create coalitions with community-based organizations that offer the support that undocumented students need and that the campuses do not have, and in the process, these coalitions will further strengthen institutions' knowledge on undocumented students and the resources these undocumented students need (Perez et al., 2010).

One of the main issues that undocumented students face, as discussed earlier, is the lack of financial resources. To address and diminish this issue, college institutions can create fundraisers to increase their scholarship and grant opportunities to undocumented students attending their school and undocumented students who are applying to their school (Perez et al., 2010). To further help undocumented students during their college application process, institutions can expand and improve their college outreach by providing the high school institutional agents the information undocumented students need regarding student services programs they offer to undocumented students, scholarships, university policies that affect undocumented students, and how the matriculation process works for undocumented students (Perez et al., 2010). Furthermore, institutions can improve their college outreach by

proving trained institutional agents, as discussed earlier, to avoid and diminish the experiences that undocumented high school seniors go through during their college selection processes such as micro assaults, microinsults, and microinvalidations (Nienhusser, Vega, & Carquin, 2016).

According to Nienhusser, Vega, and Carquin (2016), microassaults include discriminatory financial aid policies such as only talking about the FAFSA and excluding the DREAM Act. Another microassault is restricting college choice information such as institutional agents not making college information for undocumented students readily available. Lastly, other forms of microassaults are constrained life opportunities (e.g., getting internships to strengthen college applications), and denial of college opportunities (e.g., institutional agents tell undocumented students they cannot attend college).

Also according to Nienhusser, Vega, and Carquin (2016), microinsults include insensitive behaviors such as institutional agents being inconsiderate towards undocumented students. And microinvalidations include an insensitive college choice process (e.g., not being sensitive towards what the undocumented student needs like asking for an SSN), and fear of coming out (e.g., undocumented students having to reveal their status on college applications to get in). Another example of microinvalidation is narrowed college expectations. This is when institutional agents direct undocumented students to apply to one type of school such as community college. Lastly, undocumented immigrant blindness is another form of microinvalidation. This is when institutional agents assume everyone is documented.

When it comes to the mental health of undocumented students, college institutions can revamp and orient their health and clinical services to undocumented students (Perez et al., 2010). This includes training campus psychologists and counselors on the socioemotional and sociohistorical experiences that undocumented students undergo (Perez et al., 2010), and hiring



counselors that share the undocumented students' background to create a greater connection with them while reducing the stigma and concerns that they have towards seeking and receiving mental health aid (Cha, Enriquez, & Ro, 2019). This also includes offering workshops focusing specifically on the type of stress, depression, and alienation that undocumented students feel (Perez et al., 2010).

### *The Need for Continued Research*

The majority of the research done on undocumented students is focused on students from the Latinx community. There was little research that included undocumented students who identified as Asian Pacific Islanders. There needs to be more research on undocumented students from different ethnicities and races (e.g., more Asian Pacific Islander, Korean Chinese, Filipinos) aside from Latinx undocumented students. In addition, future research should include the parents and families of undocumented students giving their perspective on seeing their students struggle and motivate them to continue pursuing higher education despite the struggles and worries that they all face together as a whole family. Furthermore, future research should include the perspective of institutional agents on the resources that they lack to create an undocu-friendly environment to make undocumented students feel accepted and heard on their campus.

### *Final Thoughts*

As a DACA, recipient, Dreamer, and AB 540 student, I felt very well represented in all the research that I found. The research showed me my own experiences regarding the worries and struggles that I faced and continue to face in my academic and personal life. Despite being reminded of the downsides in my life, I was reminded of how far I've come despite the many barriers that tried to hold me back. I was reminded of my resilience.

I hope that this paper serves two purposes. The first purpose is for the undocumented student who is reading this paper: I hope that you were reminded of your resilience and I hope that you were reaffirmed that you are not alone on this difficult yet durable journey as an undocumented student. The second purpose of this paper is to bring awareness about the stress, mental and emotional health of undocumented students to educational institutions and agents, and all community members.

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